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AUTHOR Killeen, Damian
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INSTITUTION Council of Europe, Strasbourg (France).
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ABSTRACT

This paper from a symposium on shut out youth identifies some of the key social, cultural, and economic issues that must be considered to understand the phenomenon of youth homelessness. Researchers and practitioners address the problem of Europe's unmet housing needs. The factors which contribute to these needs and problems are the following: (1) demographic changes and changing family structures; (2) failures of institutional care and protection; (3) inadequate housing policies; (4) poorly formulated legal codes; (5) changing expectations of youth; (6) discrimination and exclusion of young people; (7) unemployment; and (8) deficient welfare policies. All governments of Europe are encouraged to develop comprehensive policies on welfare and housing which take into consideration the needs of young people. Full recognition should be given to youth employment problems which constitute a major cause of homelessness and general social disorganization in this population. (VM)

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SYMPOSIUM ON "SHUT OUT YOUTH"

25-30 October 1987

EUROPEAN YOUTH CENTRE

"Key issues with regard to youth housing and homelessness in Europe"

by Damian KILLEEN, SHELTER
for the European Young Homeless Group

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European Young Homelessness Group

KEY ISSUES WITH REGARD TO YOUTH HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS IN EUROPE

INTRODUCTION :

This paper from the European Young Homeless Group aims to identify some key social, cultural and economic features which must be considered in any attempt to understand the phenomenon of youth homelessness and unmet housing need in Europe. The paper reflects the experience of members of the group, which is composed of practitioners and researchers in the relevant disciplines. This is not an exhaustive analysis of youth housing need in Europe. Such an analysis requires detailed study by member governments and European bodies. The significance of the features referred to here varies in accordance with the local circumstances, policies and practices of different countries and regions, but we believe they are all relevant, in varying degrees, to an appreciation of youth housing problems, wherever they are found.

-1- SOCIAL FACTORS

(a) DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES AND CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURES

The study 'The Young Europeans' published by the Commission of the European Communities in 1983 found that 83% of 15 to 24 year olds, both married and single, live in a family framework. However, there is a general demographic trend towards the formation of smaller households which are led by younger people. These changes in household structures have not been adequately acknowledged or responded to by governments. Divorces are increasing, and children or young people are significantly affected by the rearrangements which have to be made. Increasing numbers of single parents, whilst they are able to meet the emotional needs of their children, may suffer additional economic or cultural stresses. These can also lead to family breakdowns. There is also increasing evidence that home is not always a happy place for young people. Emotional and/or sexual abuse by family members feature in the case histories of many homeless young people. All these features contribute to an increase in the number of young single people looking for housing. The motivation and ability to copy of many of these young people is affected by their experiences of abuse, rejection, abandonment etc., by families.

"In Northern countries the traditional family is losing ground".

"In Southern European countries such as Portugal, there is still a very strong sense of family".

"There was general agreement that parental love is irreplaceable".

(THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: EUROPEAN YOUTH WEEK: EUROPEAN YOUTH CENTRE 1985.)

(b)/...

 SOCIAL FACTORS (CONTINUED)

(b) FAILURES OF INSTITUTIONAL CARE AND PROTECTION

Increasingly, young people who become homeless are found to have been, at some time, recipients of institutional care or other preventative services during their childhood. However, these interventions have either failed to identify the long term risk of homelessness faced by the young person, or they have failed to prepare the young person adequately for the transition from institutional care to independent housing.

(c) HOUSING POLICIES

Government policies on housing have not developed to meet the increased demand for single person housing and for housing suitable for shared use by single, non-related persons. As a consequence, such people, if they can gain access to public housing, are limited to those areas of housing which are rejected by the population as a whole. The supply of privately rented accommodation is also in decline or is beyond young peoples' financial means.

> "What young people are used to when it comes to clothing, food and entertainment, seems to be missing totally in the market for flats; cheap and simple facilities which young people can afford and identify with. The fact that many young people want to try out new forms of living together does not make their situation any easier in the eyes of possible landlords. The result is the lack of any sense of belonging, a feeling of being lost and not really liked by anybody or simply of being pushed around".
>
> (THE SITUATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE - Dr. Hans-Peter Fricker: Council of Europe 1985.)

(d) LEGAL CODES

Legal definitions of childhood and adulthood vary greatly between European countries. However, there is commonly a 'legal limbo' in which responsibility for the welfare of a young adult is not clearly or realistically distributed between parents, the authorities and young people themselves. Legal rights of access to public and private sources of housing and the legal powers of young people to make contracts for housing tenancies are not always clearly formulated or understood. Legal protection for homeless young people is either non-existent or inadequately implemented.

> "... not only is the age of majority under civil law not identical in all Community Member States, but the differences we see in the rights bestowed on young people who have come of age show that even when a young person has come of age the meaning of the concept is not the same in all Member States. The differences between the legislation of the Member States form a jungle of special provisions ... "
>
> (THE HARMONIZATION OF THE AGE OF MAJORITY UNDER CIVIL LAW ETC., REPORT TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENS RIGHTS. Rapporteur, Mrs. N. Fontaine: October 1985).

 CULTURAL FEATURES

(a) THE CHANGING EXPECTATIONS OF YOUTH

Traditional 'steps to independence' from the parental home, via employment, continuing education, marriage etc., are being eroded. They are not being replaced by a clear consensus on alternative means of meeting the developmental and maturational needs of youth. Young people, who are educated to expect progressive improvements in lifestyle in return for study or other effort are disillusioned by the reality they experience as they grow up. In the absence of clear routes to independence they are impelled to take personal initiatives, often without adequate planning or resources, which result in personal crises, one of which is homelessness.

"In many countries the situation of youth is characterised by unemployment, a deficiency of training and education opportunities, insufficient possibilities for participation in the development of the society, poor health services, malnutrition etc. .... The Youth image of the 60's and 70's, which promised a safe social and occupational future by means of individual education, training and achievements, is now facing the problem of increasing disconnection between the termination of education and occupational chances, plans of life and the possibility to realize them ... The increasing 'risk behaviour' of young people is an expression of their search for a new lifestyle and orientation".

(HEALTHY LIFESTYLES OF YOUNG PEOPLE: World Health Organisation 1985).

(b) ATTITUDES TOWARDS YOUNG PEOPLE : DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION

Many young people experience discrimation on the grounds of age, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. They are generally excluded from all important areas of community decision making. Employment and other social policies often assume that young people are willing to separate themselves from their family and friendship networks and their social roots but there are few policies for integrating young people into new communities. Exclusion and the marginalisation of youth are consequences of a lack of priority for youth in the changing social and economic structures within Europe. This is reflected in the lack of comprehensive social policies for youth in the governments of Member States and the lack of a 'youth perspective' in social policies, such as housing, which affect populations as a whole.

"Young people, for whatever reason, are increasingly travelling about and are thus being cut off from their socio-cultural roots and being brought into contact with 'different' human communities in which they are required to assert their identity ... ... Among young Europeans, it is undoubtedly the young second generation migrants who are the most culturally disadvantaged".

(YOUTH MOBILITY: AN INVESTMENT FOR EUROPE. Mr. Etienne Grosjean, Council of Europe, First Conference of Youth Ministers Responsible for Youth. December 1985).

"Does/...

-2- CULTURAL FEATURES (CONTINUED)

(b) ATTITUDES TOWARDS YOUNG PEOPLE : DISCRIMINATION AND EXCLUSION (CONT'D)

"Does the young person of today belong, or wish to belong to our democratic way of life in Western Europe? This problem should be faced from the level of the local community to that of international European organisations that are concerned, as is the Council of Europe, with the long term future development of democracy in Europe. There are serious indications that this future is not assured, ... we must succeed in establishing a meaningful dialogue with young people. We must convince them of the value of the principles in which we believe and we must encourage them to participate fully in political and institutional life. It is only on this as a basis that we believe that democratic responsibilities can be developed".

(PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LIFE. REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION: Rapporteur, Mr. Martinez, Council of Europe 1985).

-3- ECONOMIC FEATURES

(a) UNEMPLOYMENT

Much has been said about the effects of unemployment on young people but little recognition has been given to the fact that the majority of young people now seeking independent accommodation are unemployed young people. Many communities are developed on the basis that many of their inhabitants will be elsewhere for much of the day. This is not appropriate for unemployed young people who, when they can find housing, are placed either in isolated high rise, high density housing, without community resources, many miles from suitable social facilities, or are housed in poor quality housing in decaying city centres close to facilities which they cannot afford to use. The unemployed young tenant is a relatively new phenomenon in the housing market and services must be developed to meet their needs.

(b) WELFARE POLICIES

European governments either have not developed or are demolishing social security systems which could enable an unemployed young person to set up an independent household. Governments will not spend to develop adequate affordable housing for the young unemployed, nor will they pay the costs of an adequate supply of good quality housing for purchase or rent provided by private housing developers. These policies are producing a new pauperism of youth, a new underclass, a second class status of citizenship which all young people risk, just as they risk unemployment. There is at present no cost of living index in individual countries or within Europe as a whole which accurately reflects the cost of being an unemployed young person in the 1980's and against which government welfare policies can be assessed. In the current economic climate throughout Europe it is not possible for suitable housing for young people to be provided without government subsidy, either through house building/...

(b) WELFARE POLICIES (CONTINUED)

building programmes, which, incidentally, create employment from which young people can benefit, or through welfare payments set at a level which could bring decent accommodation within these young peoples' reach.

SUMMARY :

The increase in youth housing demand stems from changing demographic trends and family structures. Current housing policies are inadequate to meet these needs. Especially at risk of homelessness as a result of this imbalance between demand and provision are young people with insecure or unsatisfactory family backgrounds. Welfare services are not sensitive to the risks these young people face and preventitive provision is poor. Legal codes are inadequate to support the autonomy of young people or to protect those in crisis. Young people are demoralised and placed at risk in the current social environment and steps must be taken to oppose discrimination. Homelessness is an extreme example of a general trend towards the exclusion of young people from important areas of community life. There is little recognition of the social needs of the unemployed and governments are unwilling to meet the full social costs of youth unemployment.

WHAT IS NEEDED :

The European Young Homeless Group recommends:-

To All Governments

i) The development of comprehensive social policies with regard to young people.
ii) The inclusion of youth housing needs in government housing policies.
iii) The development of a legal framework and practical systems to provide the fullest protection for homeless young people.
iv) The provision of adequate housing and welfare subsidies to enable unemployed young people to maintain a quality of life which does not exclude them from the mainstream of society.

To The European Parliament and The Council of Europe

i) The promotion of the above policies amongst their member states.
ii) The promotion of an exchange of research and information on youth housing between governments, non-governmental organisations and youth organisations.
iii) The establishment of a body to co-ordinate the development of youth housing policies and services throughout Europe.

DAMIAN KILLEEN
SHELTER (SCOTLAND)
FOR THE EUROPEAN YOUNG
HOMELESS GROUP
January, 1987

FOOTNOTE :

"IF ONE ACCEPTS AT THEIR FACE VALUE THE CONTENTS OF THE NATIONAL REPORTS AND THE RESULTS OF THE OECD AND EC STUDIES, THE SITUATION OF YOUTH IN EUROPE APPEARS AS A SOMBRE PICTURE. DOES THIS PICTURE NOT CONTRADICT THE IMPRESSIONS THE AVERAGE CITIZEN WILL HAVE OF THE SITUATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE ? WILL HE NOT IN HIS PROFESSIONAL AND PRIVATE DAY-TO-DAY LIFE OBSERVE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE FULL OF THE JOYS OF LIFE AND ENTIRELY COMMITTED ? ONE SHOULD, INDEED, NOT LOSE SIGHT OF THE FACT THAT NOT ALL YOUNG PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY THE PROBLEMS OUTLINED HERE IN THE SAME MANNER AND TO THE SAME DEGREE. THE REPORTS AND STUDIES DO, HOWEVER, THROW SOME LIGHT ON ONE REALITY, YOUNG PEOPLE COME UP AGAINST DAUNTING BARRIERS AT MANY STAGES IN THEIR LIVES AND AS THESE BARRIERS ARE STILL INCREASING, ONE HAS TO ASK ONESELF WHY THERE HAS BEEN SO LITTLE ADVANCE PREPARATION FOR THE FACTS OF TODAY'S LIFE."

[DR. HANS-PETER FRICKER, OP. CIT.]

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ANY COMMUNICATION WITH REGARD TO THIS PAPER SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO:

DAMIAN KILLEEN
SHELTER (SCOTLAND), FOR THE EUROPEAN YOUNG HOMELESS GROUP
65 COCKBURN STREET
EDINBURGH EH 1 1 BU
SCOTLAND. (TELEPHONE: 031 - 226 6347)

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